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# Huskers Helping Huskers: A Corporate-Level Analysis of the Nebraska Alumni Association

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# **HUSKERS HELPING HUSKERS:**

*A Corporate-Level Analysis of the  
Nebraska Alumni Association*



Anna Brodersen, Anne Conley, Jackson Grasz, Rachel Kleist, Jordan Newsom & Sam Turco  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN Spring 2019

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## Executive Summary

Tradition. Honor. Hard Work. Glory. These words echo through the stacks of Love Library, the halls of Oldfather, and the gates of Memorial Stadium. We have heard them from the moment we stepped on campus, and we will hear them until the day we move our tassels. As soon-to-be Husker alumni, our last four years at Nebraska have been years of growth as we discovered who we are, where we belong, and what our impact on the world will be. One of the most important things we have discovered is that, at Nebraska, we are a part of something that is bigger than we are alone, and we want to build an even better future for those who come after us. Being a Husker is not just about our time spent on campus: being a Husker is a lifelong journey that the Nebraska Alumni Association was created to cultivate.

Over time, the NAA appears to have become distracted from serving the alumni and has instead focused its energy into advancing University interests. To graduating Huskers, it has become unclear what value the NAA provides to them and whose interests they are promoting. This has resulted in a declining alumni membership base and an unstable revenue source. Because of this, we recommend that the NAA refocus their resources into serving alumni first.

By focusing on serving alumni first, the NAA will provide us with a way to stay involved with the University and discover our role in building a better future for Husker Nation. Devoting resources towards making a space for alumni to connect and serve one another creates a clear value proposition and a real motivation for alumni to join the NAA. People don't want to serve institutions; they want to serve people. Communicating this new focus will create a brand that shows alumni that being a member of the NAA is not just about Huskers helping the University, but about Huskers helping Huskers. Because of this viable value proposition, the NAA will gain more memberships. In time, this increased membership and continual attunement to alumni service will allow the NAA to become increasingly independent from the University and the Foundation and gain more freedom to function as its own sustainable organization.

Implementation of this nebulous solution must take on several forms in order to take root. The NAA must recreate their mission and vision statements to emphasize their focus on alumni. They must redefine success based on how well they serve the alumni, and objectively measure their successes. They must understand what they do best and what makes membership valuable to alumni. They must narrow their focus onto what matters most. Most importantly, the NAA needs to take these high-level strategic decisions and develop what concrete changes must happen within the organization for this new focus to bear fruit. This could mean changes in employee roles, workplace rituals, or even their common language.

We invite the NAA to take this journey with us: ask the strategic brainstorming questions outlined in the body of this paper, consider our recommendations, and allow tradition, honor, hard work, and glory to continue to radiate from their organization throughout Husker Nation.

## Overview

The Nebraska Alumni Association is a non-profit extension of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and separate from the Nebraska Foundation. The NAA consists of 25 full-time employees and five University interns all located at the Wick Alumni Center within University grounds. They engage 90 alumni chapters with over 25,000 members. The NAA offers programs, events, discounts in athletics, arts, scholarships, research, mentorship, advocacy, and professional development designed to connect alumni and friends with university and alumni community interests.

## Key Problem

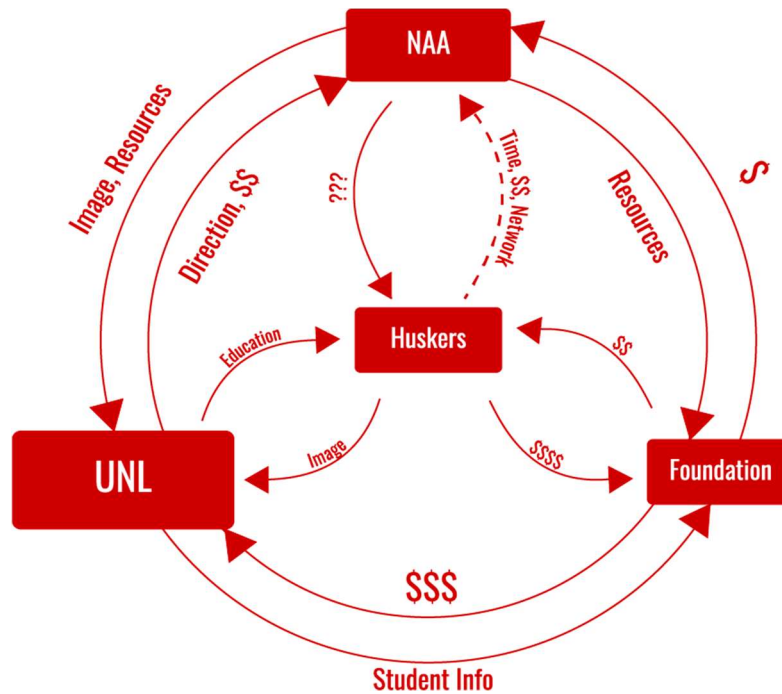
The Nebraska Alumni Association depends on outside funding to assist in their programming and events, their main benefactors being the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Nebraska Foundation. Their entangling partnerships have skewed their perceptions of who their key stakeholders are – the alumni. Figure 1 demonstrates the NAA's relationship between the University, the Foundation, and the alumni base. Instead of focusing on alumni members, their work seems to advance the missions of the University and the Foundation. The arrows that point from the University to the NAA represent where their money and direction come from. The arrow pointing back from the NAA to the University represents how the NAA funnels their resources into the University in the form of alumni networks, recruitment and retention efforts, and political advocacy. The arrows pointing to and from the foundation and the NAA are very similar to that of the University's except that less money goes to the NAA and the Foundation receives fewer resources. Lastly, the relationship between the NAA and their alumni base, labeled "Huskers," has little exchange or transfer of resources. The NAA is struggling to provide value that resonates with their target alumni and, in turn, Huskers are giving the NAA insufficient amounts of time, money, and network relations.

For the NAA to solve their membership problem, they need to re-focus their efforts on furthering the interests, ideas, and talents of their alumni. Their re-focus starts with crafting a new vision and mission so external and internal stakeholders know the NAA is dedicated to their alumni. A top-down restructuring starting with the vision and mission will trickle throughout the organization and employees can shift their focus from advancing the University to providing for their alumni membership base.

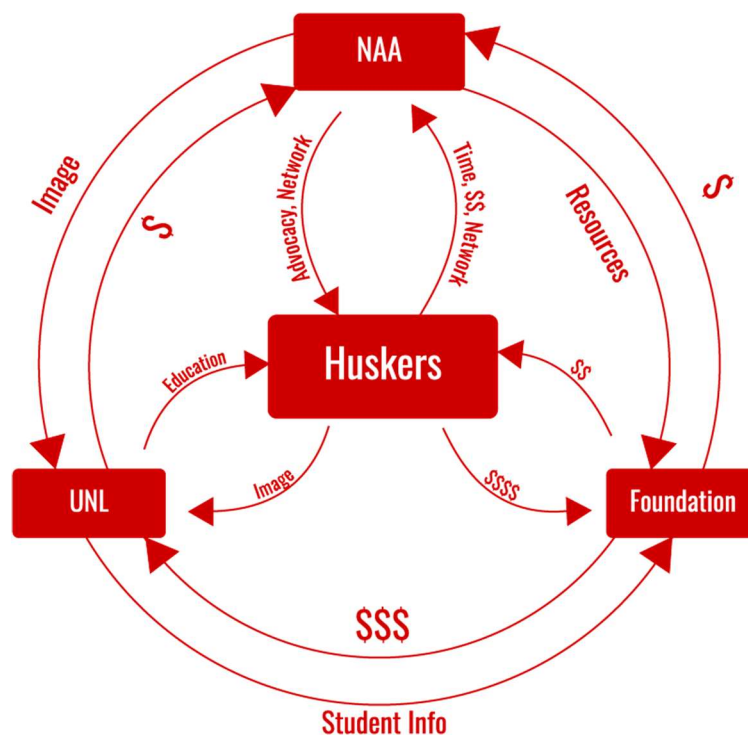
Crafting a new vision and mission requires a complete understanding of the ecosystem the Nebraska Alumni Association operates in, the key success factors necessary to thrive in this space, the core competencies that the organization uses to compete, and the main sources of value that members gain from joining the association. These key identifiers will assist the organization in restructuring and re-focusing on their main stakeholders, the alumni, who through increased membership will hopefully provide enough revenue in the future to allow for greater independence. Figure 2 demonstrates the new relationships that the NAA could have with the University, the Foundation, and Huskers after the focus of the organization has shifted. In this example, the University no longer gives the NAA its main source of direction, allowing it to come from the needs of the membership base. Also, the two arrows going to and from the NAA and Huskers are clearly defined. The NAA provides more prominent sources of value such as networks and advocacy. Huskers provide greater amounts of their time, money, and network

abilities. This even exchange is a direct result of refocusing the NAA's efforts away from the needs of the University and shifting towards the needs of the alumni.

**Figure 1: The Nebraska Alumni Association Present Day**



**Figure 2: The Nebraska Alumni Association Future Goal**



## Mission, Vision, and Guiding Principles

For the Nebraska Alumni Association to fully refocus their efforts away from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and towards their alumni and membership base, they need to reestablish their Vision and Mission. Reestablishing these two pieces will be an internal reminder for employees of their roles and motivations, as well as an external symbol of how the organization is gearing towards the needs of its main stakeholders. Before rewriting their vision and mission statements, the NAA should consider the following questions:

- Who/what is our main priority?
- How best do we serve this priority?
- What is our identity?
- How do we ensure our team has a unified focus?
- In what ways do we currently motivate our team?
- In what way should we be motivating our team?

Each of these questions must be considered in order to understand who best and how best to serve internal and external stakeholders. The Nebraska Alumni Association's vision and mission focus on the organization's desire to promote the University instead of their alumni base. Also, the vision and mission of the NAA use third person pronouns, creating a feeling of distance between them and their members. If they change these pronouns to be personal, they can create a feeling of community and togetherness that will trickle down throughout the organization.

### *Vision*

The NAA's customer-oriented vision states, "The Nebraska Alumni Association is the trusted heart and home for alumni engagement at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The Association works collaboratively with its campus partners to transform alumni pride and loyalty into action for the advancement of our university".

The vision can be edited to state, "We are the Nebraska Alumni Association, the trusted heart and home for alumni engagement at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. We work collaboratively with our campus partners to transform alumni pride and loyalty into action for the advancement of Huskers."

Vision can be defined as motivating employees at all levels to aim for the same target while leaving room for individual and team contributions (Rothaermel, 2017, p. 34). The NAA's original vision attempts to motivate each employee to uphold the value of being the trusted heart and home for alumni engagement. If each employee contributes to the NAA's success, then they will continue to hold that high standing among their alumni. Employees are given a substantial amount of room for innovation and creativity in achieving overall NAA success expressed by transforming alumni pride and loyalty into action for the advancement of the university. The fact that alumni pride and loyalty are difficult to measure leaves room for interpretation by



employees. Also, leaning more into the strong community that is the NAA, changing pronouns to ‘we’ and ‘our’ create a greater sense of self and purpose for internal employees.

### *Mission*

The company’s vision is the NAA’s “why” and their mission is how they carry it out. The NAA’s mission states, “The Nebraska Alumni Association’s mission is to promote the achievements and aspirations of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln by engaging its students, alumni and friends”.

After asking the questions provided above, a mission suggestion could be, “We build meaningful relationships between past, present, and future Huskers by developing purposeful programming, advocating for alumni interests, and cultivating the Nebraska Tradition.”

The mission statement is what an organization does; it defines the means by which the vision is accomplished (Rothaermel, 2017, p. 34). Like the vision, the NAA’s mission mentions the need to promote the aspirations of the University. Also like the vision, the mission fails to provide metrics on how to measure promotions and engagements which is the role of a mission statement. When potential alumni read the NAA’s mission statement they notice that this organization is focused on bettering the University’s agenda and not the alumni’s. There’s also a lack of clarity in how the NAA attempts to live out their vision. The NAA’s mission also fails to provide an action for its employees. If their entire job revolves around the university’s achievements and aspirations, then the only need of an alumni membership base is to provide revenue. Overall, the mission of the NAA falls short of clarifying how they live out their vision to engage their alumni in its different facets as well as focusing on their key stakeholder, their alumni membership.

### *Guiding Principles*

After an established vision and mission, a company creates values or guiding principles or value statements for employees to better understand the culture of the company (Rothaermel, 2017, p. 34). The NAA currently has six guiding principles:

- We will welcome all alumni, students, fans, and friends to our Husker family.
- We will help all alumni and friends find meaningful, fulfilling and impactful ways to connect to the university.
- We will create an energetic and memorable environment that inspires employees, volunteers, and partners.
- We will maximize our communication channels and data to share the university’s successes and progress.
- We will be the campus home for all alumni and manage venues that allow us to engage our members and friends.
- We will be creative, purposeful and mission-focused in our quest for human financial resources.

The NAA prides itself on its community development within the organization and among its employees. These guiding principles reflect their dedication to developing each other as well as

finding meaningful ways to impact alumni and the university. One critique, however, is that they focus on their role as hosts and a home for alumni, but they do not charge themselves with understanding the needs of alumni and revising, deleting, and restructuring their association as the needs of their alumni change. The ability to adapt and change is a vital competency that organizations need in order to survive. The principles stated above are static and lack fluidity. Adapting and changing with the needs and wants of their perspective members will continue to be a challenge unless the NAA can experiment and encourage change and failure. Employees are not encouraged to disrupt which is a result of their UNL mindset.

## **Business Level Strategy**

The NAA must experiment and find their value propositions that better meets the needs of its stakeholders. they must set actionable and achievable goals, be equipped to evaluate results and adapt with their failures. If they don't occupy a distinct space, then how can they grow loyalty?

The Nebraska Alumni Association fits the red ocean business level strategy defined by Frank Rothaermel in his textbook *Strategic Management*. There are four main strategies that most firms fall under: cost-leadership, differentiation, blue ocean, and red ocean (Rothaermel, 2017, p. 174-183). Cost-leadership requires the firm to offer the lowest prices compared to competitors. The NAA requires either an annual fee or a one-time membership fee, the cost differs based on age and graduation date, where competitors competing for alumni time may offer free to lower cost groups and options, therefore, the NAA is not operating in a cost-leadership space. Firms who are using a differentiation strategy offer greater valued products or services at a higher price. Consumers are willing to pay more because the value is so much greater than competitors.

The NAA is currently struggling with their value creation, therefore they are not operating in the differentiation space. A blue ocean strategy is the most difficult for a firm to pull off because it requires the firm to operate in both the cost-leadership and differentiation spaces. The NAA is not using a cost-leadership or a differentiation strategy, therefore, they are not using a blue ocean strategy. The NAA does, however, fall under a red ocean strategy which is what happens when a firm attempts a blue ocean strategy, but instead of being great at cost-leadership and differentiation, they are below average in both. The NAA is attempting too much by "being everyone to everything" which has left them without a clear business level strategy.

## **Ecosystem Identification**

One of the biggest difficulties with identifying where the NAA should focus within its ecosystem (the diagram presented at the beginning of this analysis) is that they do so many things that it can be difficult to pinpoint who specifically competes with them for people's time since they pride themselves in their efforts to do everything. To help better identify the NAA's ecosystem, two questions were asked: "What competes for time?", and "What competes for people's money?" Since the NAA has required membership dues and does take people's times if they want to be an involved member, those are key questions to ask. We separated out the NAA's market into three categories that they target (the categories are not exact but for analysis purposes only) and evaluated what competes for time and money with each target market.

### *Target Markets*

Before analyzing each target market, it is important to understand that some of the main things the NAA does are host events for people, especially related to athletics (like a tailgate), and they do things like connect people through networking. So, any athletic event or tailgate or networking opportunity available to alumni outside of the NAA is something that competes with the NAA because it competes for an alumni's time and wants. If a person's company hosts networking events and tailgates before football games, that person may not view the NAA as an organization that they need to join. Therefore, it is important to understand other activities or commitments that people have that may make joining the NAA seem like one too many things on their plate.

The first market that the NAA tries to reach is college students. Current students have a lot of school pride, so getting students to sign up for the NAA (or the SAA - the student version of the NAA) seems like the best way to get them locked in for life. But many things compete for a student's time: classes, studying, working a job, volunteering, social media, and involvement in other RSOs and Greek life on campus (Oprea, 2016). Things that compete for money include tuition, traveling, food, and rent (or room and board).

The second market that the NAA tries to reach is recent graduates and young alumni. Fresh out of college, alumni either want to get as far away from college as possible, or they are still riding high on their wave of alumni pride and are the perfect target for the NAA. Things that compete for their time could include: a job, job hunting, family, other networking opportunities, moving to a new location, alumni groups that aren't affiliated with the NAA, college friends, and community involvement. Starting life outside college incurs a lot of costs that compete for their money, as well as the fact that many students likely took out loans to pay for college, so paying even more money to be part of an alumni organization can be a turn-off.

The third group that the NAA targets are more elderly alumni. These alumni may be retired or close to retirement, and their affinity for the University is mostly nostalgic, and that, combined with a feeling of wanting to give back to the younger generation and the monetary means to do so, makes them the perfect target for the NAA. Some things that may compete for their time include a job (if not yet retired), family, traveling, public service, household activities, TV, and hobbies ("Study Reveals How Retirees Spend Their Time", 2018). Many of the same things that compete for their time also compete for their money.

Since most of the NAA's revenue comes from renting venues, it could appear at first that the NAA's ecosystem revolves around space management and rental business - which is a lot of what they do. However, the ecosystem they are in is one that is multifaceted because of the many functions the NAA performs. Giving back, networking, and benefits (especially the sports-related ones) are the biggest things that the NAA offers its alumni, so any business that can offer those things to alumni is a competitor. That could include nonprofits, giving to the NU Foundation, attending football games, being involved in one's company, or even being a part of a Husker alumni group (which do not require members to be a part of the NAA).

### *Importance & Recommendation*

Why is it important to understand what ecosystem the NAA is in? Understanding their ecosystem and what they do helps uncover opportunities that the NAA has to better target certain groups of alumni, and it also identifies potential threats to the NAA, including all the organizations that compete for alumni's time (Durden, 2018). Understanding the NAA's ecosystem can help predict performance for them in the future. For example, understanding that the NAA can be a hub for a "better Husker sports experience" through tailgates or other sports-related events that they offer, can help predict that when Husker athletic teams are performing well, more alumni will want to be part of the NAA organization. Beyond this, understanding their ecosystem can help the NAA optimize how they structure themselves. For example, instead of putting one person in charge of events, and one person in charge of university relations, it may be more beneficial to put a team of people in charge of a certain market segment (i.e., sports lovers, undergrads, young family alumni, retired alumni). Structuring themselves like this would allow the person or team working for the NAA to focus on the specific needs of the people in that segment and coordinate events and opportunities through that lens.

### **Key Success Factors**

To become the heart of the Huskers, the NAA must deliver on vital key success factors. Key success factors are "the factors within an industry that influence a firm's ability to outperform rivals" (Grant, n.d., p.127). They are the answer to what customers want and how firms survive the competition. It has already been discussed that the NAA is in a multifaceted ecosystem and has a variety of customers to appease. To identify the key success factors, we looked at alumni organizations specifically to see what the NAA must do to succeed. There are several key success factors that they must deliver on to compete and satisfy the needs of their customers, including:

- Connecting alumni and students based on similar interests;
- Allowing alumni to impact university decisions; and
- Providing a strong value proposition.

### *Connect Alumni & Students*

One key success factor for alumni organizations is allowing students and alumni to connect based on shared interests. These interests could stem from university involvement, research, athletics, or industry. Whatever the basis for the connections, the NAA must open communication lines between current students and alumni to benefit both parties. This could be in the form of an open forum or a structured membership. Regardless of the format, it will give alumni a way to invest in the University in a one-on-one setting and make them feel more involved. It will also connect students to the NAA prior to becoming alumni, which will increase their awareness and knowledge of benefits as well.

### *Give Alumni a Voice*

A second key success factor for alumni organizations is giving alumni a voice back to the university so they feel as though they have a say in decisions and happenings. It will make the alumni feel like they are making a tangible difference. This could be done through increasing the

awareness and impact of the Alumni Board and could be measured through surveys to look at the perceived impact. People want to feel that their opinions matter, and alumni want to be able to give back to their institution. By ensuring that there is some type of forum or line of communication available for alumni to share their voice with University officials, the NAA can increase the involvement level and perceived impact felt by alumni.

### *Provide Strong Value Proposition*

The third key success factor for alumni organizations is providing a strong value proposition where the benefits far exceed the costs of joining. Because the NAA competes for the time and attention of all Nebraska alumni, they must deliver value that appeals to the diverse individuals that make up their markets. The value proposition is the pull that will bring the customers in and get them involved in the first place. A strong value proposition tells customers why this organization is worth their time and money over other organizations or involvements available to them. Is paying for and reading the quarterly magazine more valuable than scrolling through Twitter or Facebook? Are the Nebraska networking events worth more than happy hour with coworkers after work? What can the NAA do to capture and retain the attention of their audience and give a strong value proposition?

## **Metrics**

The key question after implementing any new business ideas to deliver on these key success factors is “How do we know it’s working?” The answer is simple: metrics. By developing ways to measure the success of meeting a customer's needs, it is easier to know how well an organization is doing so.

### *Metrics: Connecting alumni and students based on similar interests*

- Mentee to mentor conversion rate
- Event attendance
- Surveys

One way to measure how you are connecting alumni and students is by tracking the mentee to mentor conversion rate. Our recommendations include implementing a mentorship program for alumni to get more involved and connected to students. By tracking the percentage of student mentees who become mentors as alumni, you can track the prolonged interest and value that the program provides. The higher the conversion rate, the more value we can assume the program is providing.

Another way to track this key success factor is by looking at attendance at all student-alumni combined events. Having events for both audiences is important to give people not involved in the mentorship program the opportunity to network and exchange resources such as knowledge and skills. Names, interests, and contact information should be taken at every event. These can be analyzed to ensure that both audiences are taking advantage of certain opportunities and put people with similar interests in contact with one another.

A third way to measure connecting students and alumni is through administering surveys. Interests, willingness to participate, and event ideas can be gauged to better develop programs that connect the students and alumni.

*Metrics: Allowing alumni to impact university decisions*

- Surveys
- Alumni board interest

The second key success factor is to allow alumni to impact University decisions by giving them a voice through the NAA. Again, one way to measure this is through surveys. An initial survey could be administered by asking alumni if they feel their voice is heard by the University through the NAA, asking what avenues they use for advocating their ideas and interests at the University, and how they would like to see the NAA become their advocate at the University.

Another way to measure this key success factor is to track alumni board interest. One of our other recommendations includes revamping the NAA alumni board, and hopefully, this increases the visibility of the group and attracts more members from all generational groups. The interest in the alumni board can be looked at in many ways: applications, questions asked, social media engagement with relevant posts, and clicks on the website page correlating with the board. Each of these can provide additional insight into how many people are interested in learning more about and being a part of the alumni board. As the awareness of and engagements with alumni board-relevant content increases, the NAA will know that they are successfully meeting the need of its stakeholders to have a voice at the University.

*Metrics: Providing a strong value proposition*

- Event attendee information
- Graduate to alumni conversion rates
- Social media engagement
- Surveys

Our last key success factor is providing a strong value proposition to alumni to entice them to give their time, money, and energy to the NAA over other organizations or activities available to them. One very important way to track this is by looking at attendance at every NAA event. Having people “sign in” and knowing their name, graduation year, contact information, how they heard about the event, and even interests can be very valuable in tracking who is coming to events and what kind of events are the most interesting to them. By getting their contact information, it can be easier to let them know about similar events or opportunities that coincide with their interests in the future.

Arguably the most obvious way to measure if the NAA is delivering a strong value proposition to prospective members is to continue to look at the conversion rates of graduating students to NAA members in their first few years out of school. If the NAA starts to deliver more value to stakeholders, this conversion rate should continue to go up as more graduates are seeing the great value they can get from and give to the NAA.

Younger generations are all very social media-savvy. Social media is a great way to interact with these alumni and students and to share with them what the NAA is all about. Tracking engagements on social media posts is quite simple - most sites do it for you! By looking at the levels of engagement (likes, shares, views, etc.), we can track how the NAA is upping their social media game and interacting with its members on a platform that is easily accessible and familiar to them.

Finally, surveys can be helpful to track the perceived value proposition from the NAA. Students and members can be asked about their satisfaction with the NAA, what they would like to see (or not see) from the NAA, and what other ideas they might have to continue to increase the value proposition. This can provide both quantitative and qualitative results based on the format of the questions and answers.

Being able to track concrete measurements correlating to the key success factors of the NAA is vital to staying accountable on strategic goals and objectives. These metrics can also provide keen insight on how exactly current and prospective members feel about the programs and events that the NAA offers. They can be used to guide future strategic initiatives and purposeful programming that allow the NAA to attract, retain, and please past, current, and future Huskers.

## **Branding**

### *Questions to Consider:*

- What should people think of (or not think of) when they think of the NAA?
- What should the NAA's reputation be?
- What would motivate and inspire people to join the NAA?
- What are the most important aspects of the NAA to Huskers?
- How can the NAA's branding reach many different demographics?

### *NAA's Current Challenges*

In evaluating the NAA's current brand strategy, what stuck out to us as the NAA's brand was two things: "Everything to everyone" and their relationship to athletics. Regardless of whether this is what the NAA's actual brand strategy is, it is our perception of what the NAA is striving to be - and as defined earlier, branding is how the customer sees the NAA. The positive side to being, "Everything to everyone" is that if someone has a question, the NAA has an answer. We likened this relationship to that of an RA and a resident, and in this case, the NAA is the RA and alumni are the residents. The negative side of a branding strategy like this is that it has led to somewhat of a directionless organization. The NAA is trying to do too many things at once, which has resulted in them doing many things at a passable level, instead of a few things at a transformative level. Athletics will probably always be tied into branding at the NAA because athletics and supporting Husker sports are a huge part of the University - you cannot separate the two. However, if athletics is one of the only focuses of the NAA and its branding, the NAA's success becomes dependent on the success of athletics, because if people associate the NAA and football and football does poorly, light does not shine favorably on the NAA and it discourages long-term success.



When considering what people should think of when they think of the NAA, it is also helpful to consider what you *do not* want people to think of when they think of the NAA. For effective branding that causes people to think of the NAA in a positive light, it is important to dispel the perception of the NAA being associated with money, being disconnected, or being outdated. Those are all words that will send the relevance of the NAA to today's alumni to the graveyard because many people have the perception that they have already given the University enough money. If they see the NAA as being another arm of the University that just wants more money, without the perception of the NAA offering a lot of value to alumni, the NAA will likely continue missing their key market and only appealing to older, wealthy alumni.

So, what should be the purpose of the NAA's brand? The NAA's brand should accomplish a few things: it should make the NAA distinct, specifically distinct from the NU Foundation. Their brand should grab students from the first day of school and provide continual engagement for students and alumni through their focus areas - it should be easy to associate something with the NAA (e.g. when people think of UNL networking opportunities, they think the NAA, or if they want to find a way to be involved in the community, they head straight to the NAA). The NAA should be a connecting point for people, but going even beyond that, its brand should evoke nostalgia and get people excited to see the NAA's announcements, whether that be an event to attend or a way to get involved.

The NAA's refreshed brand should generate thoughts of tradition, prestige, Husker Power, honor, and connection. Additionally, it should invoke feelings of being a part of something bigger than we are, having a sense of belonging, and being able to change the future.

#### *Recommendation: Huskers Helping Huskers*

A proposal to help kickstart the NAA's re-branding is to adopt the slogan "Huskers Helping Huskers". The NAA's homepage of their website already says that they, "...connect alumni with Dear Old Nebraska U, and with each other," ("Alumni & Friends", n.d.), and they need to a catchphrase to build their brand around. They should be and are a connecting point to people, which "Huskers Helping Huskers" can play into. "Huskers Helping Huskers" can mean many different things. It could be building the opportunity for alumni to help students through mentoring or through serving on an advisory board that presents suggestions to the University about how to make student life and student opportunities better. It could also mean alumni helping alumni through networking opportunities and professional development, or it could mean alumni helping those in their community through volunteer opportunities. Being a Husker is not just defined to a student's time in school or being a resident of Nebraska, and the NAA needs to think about both present and future Huskers. "Huskers Helping Huskers" could even be alumni helping future Huskers, recruiting future Huskers, or offering scholarships through the NAA.

A perfect example of how "Huskers Helping Huskers" could play out and garner recognition and a positive reputation for the NAA is through helping with the severe Nebraska flooding that occurred in March 2019. The NAA's page on helping Nebraska flood victims referred people to the NU Foundation and to the UNL Bookstore to donate money to help, to the Nebraska Extension for information, to UNL for resources, and to the Lincoln Journal Star for a list of organizations that are providing flood relief ("Help Nebraska Flood Victims", n.d.). Instead of referring people elsewhere, the NAA should be the connecting point for people who want to



volunteer their time and assistance to those in Nebraska who are in need. Instead of just being a referral point, the NAA could become an organization that transforms lives because they connect alumni, students, and future Huskers with opportunities to help and give back to people in the Nebraska community. It would be “Huskers Helping Huskers” in action because the NAA helped put it into action. It would be life-changing work powered by the NAA and the strong arms of Nebraska alumni who want to make a difference. Those are meaningful opportunities that will inspire people to want to join the NAA because it pulls on what the Husker mentality is all about - grit, hard work, helping others, and giving back.

“Huskers Helping Huskers” could completely revamp the NAA’s social media presence because it can be turned into a hashtag and allow the NAA to start sharing stories of Huskers helping Huskers and encouraging people to share their own stories. And that is where the brand starts to really develop, because people will associate the NAA with Huskers of all ages wanting to help each other create a better life, and it can extend beyond the Nebraska border because Huskers live all over the world and can help each other no matter where they are. “Huskers Helping Huskers”, if fully embraced, could help cultivate a lifelong Husker mentality, which is what the NAA needs to stay relevant and to be truly a transformative organization.

### *Importance*

Branding is important for the NAA because it sets the tone for how the “customer” (in this case, alumni, their families, students, and future Huskers) perceives the NAA. Branding is not just a logo and graphics; it goes beyond that to include the website, social media, alumni interactions with the NAA staff, and all experiences of alumni when they not just interact, but also when they *think of*, the NAA (“Why is Strategy Important?”, n.d.).

There are several key benefits to good branding. Branding helps a company or organization set themselves apart from competitors by communicating through branding what kind of company they are - this is communicated through anything from a logo to the customer service experience. It also helps provide brand recognition, which means that people can associate certain logos, events, hashtags, etc. with a specific organization (Smithson, 2015). If there is positive brand recognition, that can lead to public trust in the organization, as well as the ability to more easily generate new customers because people feel the organization is familiar, dependable, and they are more willing to refer the organization through word of mouth. But branding helps more than just people on the outside - branding can also provide motivation for staff by creating a more defined focus of what and how they want the customer to experience being involved in the organization. Thoughtful and effective branding would help set the NAA apart from competitors, give them more positive brand recognition, help drive interest of people who want to invest in the NAA because they feel that it is worth it, and it would provide more direction for the NAA’s employees.

## Core Competencies

### *Questions to Consider:*

- What are the NAA's best abilities?
- What activities does the NAA do that distract from what they are best at?
- What new abilities or resources does the NAA need to develop to deliver the best value?

### *Importance*

For any business to maintain long term success, it must have critical resources or abilities that set it apart from its competition. These abilities are difficult to replicate by the organization's competition and when understood well, become the main source of value creation for both the company and its customers (Ward, 2018). Commonly referred to as core competencies, these abilities are vital to the primary functions of the company. Unfortunately, many companies do not fully understand what their core competencies are. Just because a company does something, and might even do it well, does not make it a core competency. Rather, these are functions that will provide long-term stability and competitive advantage for the organization over its competition. Organizations that spend too much time chasing new projects without meeting the needs of their core functions risk gutting their primary source of value that keeps them in business and keeps their customers loyal to them instead of going to a rival or even finding a substitute.

### *Current Competencies*

The Nebraska Alumni Association performs a wide variety of services for its various stakeholders. An evaluation of the NAA's various offerings and an in-depth understanding of the internal workings of the organization helped to identify the core competencies of the organization. These competencies reflect the abilities and resources of the NAA that drive sustained value for its members and are unique to the NAA in a way that would be difficult to replicate by any competing organization.

#### *Current Competencies: Alumni Events*

The first identified core competency of the Nebraska Alumni Association is planning and executing alumni events. These events, tailored to the needs of alumni, provide unparalleled in-person experiences for alumni that allow them to reconnect with each other and with the University of Nebraska in ways that print media and electronic communication cannot. From tailgates on Husker home games to professional service-oriented events for student members, the NAA has a deep understanding of how to bring value directly to its customers in tangible ways through these events. The NAA should continue to use this knowledge to develop events according to member needs and provide Husker experiences to alumni that they otherwise could not get themselves.

#### *Current Competencies: Networking*

The second identified core competency is the Nebraska Alumni Association's strong networking ability between in alumni core and other university stakeholders. Through its active role in

UNL's history since the very first graduating class of students, the NAA has been deeply embedded in the University's culture and has built many meaningful relationships as a result. These partnerships with the University administration, athletics, and others allow the NAA to provide value to members by connecting them back to the parts of the University that mean the most to them as well as to other alumni with similar interests. This competency is incredibly crucial to the future success of the NAA as it allows them to tap into resources outside of the NAA itself that other organizations could not access without their integration to the university and its culture. The NAA should continue to create, build, and maintain these kinds of relationships with partners and extend the access and benefits of this network to its members.

#### *Current Competencies: UNL Cultural Knowledge*

The third and final identified core competency of the Nebraska Alumni Association is the deep cultural knowledge of the University and the state of Nebraska. The NAA has developed this as a key resource. A simple walk through the NAA's Wick Alumni Center is enough to give any person a deep sense of UNL nostalgia. The history of the University of Nebraska is embedded within the NAA itself and as a result, the organization possesses a clear understanding of the evolution of the culture of its students and alumni who now reside throughout the state and world. The NAA needs to exploit this resource and the knowledge it provides to ensure that it is meeting its member's needs and expectations precisely how they want them to be met. This competency is particularly unique to the NAA because of the scope and depth of the knowledge and expertise that the organization possesses. What is more, it can be used to increase the value of nearly every offering they provide their members to enrich their experience.

#### *Competency Recommendations: Alumni Advocacy*

The NAA has several competencies that form the base of its current organizational model. However, as significant strategic changes to the organization are recommended, some additions to their core competencies are needed in order to align the NAA's purpose with what it actually does. In other words, the Nebraska Alumni Association's mission should be lived out through its core competencies. One of the major new concepts introduced in the proposed mission statements for the Nebraska Alumni Association is that the organization needs to become the primary advocate for alumni interests to the university. As a result, alumni advocacy needs to become a core competency for the NAA. This has the potential to become one of the most vital sources of value to NAA members as their personal interests and concerns can be brought directly to the University through the NAA's services. This also provides the opportunity for the NAA to strengthen its relationship with its members and gain invaluable insight into their changing needs. The NAA should heavily consider how it can best serve members by adopting alumni advocacy as a core competency and building it out over time.

#### *Competency Recommendations: Adaptation*

Universities are notoriously slow to change as they hold tight to their rigid hierarchical structures and burdensome rules for how to go about making changes. The world, however, is changing at an ever-increasing pace through technology and culture. Any organization that fails to embrace this change and the changing needs of its customers, as a result, is doomed to be left behind. The Nebraska Alumni Association is no exception. One of the key problems identified by the organization was a failure to attract the young millennial generation. While it is good to

recognize the importance of meeting this generation's needs, it would be a more valuable lesson to learn why it was missed in the first place. The millennials were chased with the same programs and offerings as all previous generations without recognizing that not only are they different, but their own needs and preferences are constantly changing along with society. So rather than going all in to change the NAA to focus on just this generation and then inevitably be slow in meeting the different needs of the next generation, the NAA should instead determine how it can embed adaptation, flexibility, and constant learning deep within its processes, abilities, and culture. Making adaptation a core competency will set the Nebraska Alumni Association up for a lifetime of success as it navigates and even predicts future changes to society and alumni interests.

### *Competency Recommendations: Importance*

With the additions of alumni advocacy and adaptation as core competencies, the Nebraska Alumni Association will be well positioned with five solid competencies that allow it to obtain sustained competitive advantage and provide excellent value to NAA members. By focusing in on these competencies and avoiding the temptation to stray far from them in its offerings, the NAA will continue to develop its brand and build a strong reputation among its members as it sees total membership increase over time. They will now be meeting the most valuable needs of their members and will be able to strategically adjust their offerings over time as adaptation is required. While the association still cannot be all things to all people, these core competencies will allow the NAA to deliver value to all alumni association members.

## **Sources of Value**

There are several forces and activities which make the Nebraska Alumni Association valuable. These activities and forces are called value drivers. When trying to determine how to compete, organizations must define who they want to serve and what needs, wishes, and desires of that group they want to fulfill (Rothmarel, p. 177). The next question an organization must ask is how to meet those needs, wishes and desires. This is where defining sources of value comes in. Because the NAA is in a position where a cost leadership strategy is essentially impossible, they must take on a differentiation strategy.

### *Questions to Consider*

- Who do we want to serve?
- What are their needs, wishes, and desires?
- How can we meet those needs?
- What makes going to an event worth breaking your routine?
- How do people find out about our services? How should they? When?
- How would an alum communicate a new idea or concern to the University? How can we help them do that?
- What is about the Husker athletics experience that is valuable even when the teams are not performing well? How can we become part of that?

### *Current Sources of Value*

So, let us apply this concept and these questions to the NAA. Who does the NAA serve? According to their current mission statement, the NAA identifies the university as its focus of service: “The Nebraska Alumni Association's mission is to promote the achievements and aspirations of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln by engaging its students, alumni and friends” (About the NAA, 2019, emphasis our own). If the University is their primary focus, what needs of the University does the NAA serve? The NAA provides the University and its foundation with alumni networking resources, advancement of University interests beyond the capabilities of the University itself, as well as performance of “critical recruitment and retention efforts” (“Volunteer & Give, NAA, 2019). What activities does the NAA perform that accomplish these tasks? Activities that expand the Nebraska alumni network such as open-to-the-public events, volunteer efforts for University advocacy and service like Huskers for Higher Education, and mobilizing alumni for student recruitment or scholarship donations.

While these are the ways the NAA generates value for its “customer” of focus - the University - this direction of flows is inherently problematic. When most firms do an excellent job of delivering value to their focal customer, they get more customers and more profit. However, the NAA is in a unique position: the University is only one paying customer. If the NAA does a great job of delivering value to the University, another university cannot notice the quality of work and purchase their services. Because the NAA receives a relatively fixed amount of resources from the University, the NAA could put a great deal of effort and resources into generating this value but receive no significant benefit from doing so. Currently, all the extra value they create for their focal customer doesn’t generate new income. This is why we recommend the NAA shift their focus.

### *Recommendations*

When we asked these same questions with a focus on serving Nebraska Alumni, we identified four potential value drivers for NAA membership. There are many forces and activities which make a Nebraska Alumni Association membership valuable, but we recommend the NAA narrow their focus to what they *really* want to do for Alumni. We suggest the NAA choose to serve members by connecting Huskers to one another, providing an avenue for Huskers to connect with their alma mater, ensuring successful Husker careers, and enkindling Husker pride/strengthening the Husker tradition.

#### Events

The NAA connects Huskers to one another through hosting relevant events that generate connections, then maintaining and leveraging those connections in fitting ways. Hosting is also one of the NAA’s core competencies and is an excellent space to develop value generation for alumni. The key question we encourage here is asking “what makes going to an event worth breaking your routine?” When we asked ourselves this question, our

resounding answer was “if it is clearly relevant, interesting, or beneficial to me as an individual.”

### Professional Development

The NAA ensures successful Husker careers by providing career coaching, networking groups, and personal development opportunities. These activities, such as the Young Alumni Academy, the Nebraska Women’s Leadership Network, and career services are already being well performed and are valuable to alumni. However, the fact that these sources of value exist is not readily obvious to prospective NAA members. We recommend asking, “How do people find out about these activities? How should they? When?”

### Communications/Media

The NAA currently connects Huskers to their Alma Mater through their high-quality communications. Their magazine and content effectively deliver information to alumni about the goings-on at the University. However, we are recommending a two-way street. We would like to challenge the NAA to develop and improve activities which give alumni an avenue for influencing and getting involved with the University instead of just learning about it from a distance. Ask, “how would an alum communicate a new idea or concern to the University? How can we help them do that?”

### Husker Athletics Experience

One of the ways the desire for Husker pride is already fulfilled is through the Nebraska athletics experience, and especially through football. Currently, the performance of the football team is a huge determinant of NAA membership rates, indicating it is indeed a source of value. While the football team’s performance is beyond the control of the NAA, the NAA’s involvement in the Husker athletics *experience* is securely within their control. This presents an opportunity for the NAA to take advantage of the value alumni find in enjoying Husker athletics and the fact Husker athletics are associated with the NAA. The space we recommend brainstorming is to begin by asking, “What is about the Husker athletics experience that is valuable even when the teams are not performing well?” i.e. “Why do people still go to games when the football team is 1 and 5?” Then, “How can we become a(n inextricable) part of that?”

### *Importance*

In order to successfully differentiate a product or service, an organization must increase the consumer perceived value of the product or service they offer, making them willing to pay a higher price (Rothmarel, p.178). The crux of developing value drivers is determining which activities or forces successfully accomplish this task. This exposes which organizational activities are most vital to its value proposition, and which activities simply drain resources.

With a renewed focus on serving the alumni instead of the University, increased effort and resources put into generating value would be able to generate increased income for the NAA in the form of new alumni memberships. Leveraging their core competency of networking, the NAA will be able to determine which needs of their alumni they would like to meet and develop and improve the activities they perform which meet those needs. By asking how they will meet the needs of alumni, the NAA can identify their value drivers and direct their resources and efforts into those which are most productive.

## **Focus Areas**

### *Questions to Consider:*

- Are the activities that create the most value the prime focal points of our firm?
- What activities distract from our attention, resources, and time that do not increase the value of our product or decrease our costs?
- What areas of our firm are under-optimized and how can we leverage these?
- What focus areas have the greatest return on investment and how should we re-allocate our resources to reflect these strengths?

### *Defined Target Market*

As discussed earlier in this thesis, a more readily defined target market is a critical focus area for the NAA's success. Defining a target market allows for improved resource allocation and effectiveness. Blurred edges of a defined target market, as the NAA currently operates with, create large inefficiencies about capital. Time and budget are constrained entities, particularly within the non-profit sector, so focus on a more optimally defined target market is a critical point of improvement.

### *Data Collection/Assignment Specification*

Currently, the NAA does not have an organized system of data collection. This makes hard decisions even more difficult, as the NAA's vision is exposed to data blind spot. This can lead to inefficient resource use. A clear antidote to this issue is to develop a data collection focus. This may take many forms. For example, collection of student information, demographics, and attendance numbers at recruitment events will speak to the efficacy of events, and this data, in turn, sharpens strategy by creating a more pointed identification of how to best fit the changing environment.

Additionally, assignment specification as applied to data collection will create a more organized unit for the NAA workforce. A work chart that specifies job specification will show where additional responsibilities, such as data and research collection, can be placed. This creates a

stronger workforce system by integrating these responsibilities and clearly depicting how this work will get done.

### *Formal Strategic Outline*

Most Big Ten schools make public their strategic initiatives, goals, and actionable items. This creates greater public accountability and may help hold the NAA to stronger consistency. One area of focus for the NAA, then, is to consider publishing their strategic initiative to their public domains. This also requires NAA to set forth an organized list of actionable items, which helps to clarify their strategy as it applies to both their long- and short-term agenda.

### *Resource Inventory*

Within distinct activities along a value chain, each activity must either add incremental value to the operation or reduce its relative costs. Understanding resource allocation, then, is critical to optimize the most valuable activities. Without a clear conception of which resources and of what value are going where, the NAA is likely underutilizing certain resources in areas of business that do not offer much leverage. Outlining the NAA's value chain and respective resource allotment is a critical focus area because it will lead to a more beneficial distribution of resources, and thus increase its value creation, or in certain cases, more substantially reduce its relative costs.

### *Institutionalized Research*

The very nature of a university mediates constant change, and firms that find themselves dependent on university products, in this case, students, must be aware of the effects of this change. Changes in consumer motivations, tastes, desires, and lifestyles occur generationally, so business practices and strategies that were highly relevant and effective with one generation may completely fail to address the needs posed by the next generation. Because of this constant influx of change, the NAA must institutionalize their research. Research assignments can be department or role specific, but they should incorporate the metrics discussed above and appropriately measure changes in consumer behavior. For example, over the next five years, most graduates of the University of Nebraska will be members of Generation Z. As this change occurs, NAA should understand how their marketing efforts, for example, will need to shift to market more suitably to this new group. Having a greater understanding of environmental trends through institutionalized, cyclical research will aid these efforts through transitional periods.



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